The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20121022195446/http://www.michaelparenti.org/Imperialism…

Imperialism 101

Chapter 1 of *Against Empire* by Michael Parenti

Imperialism has been the most powerful force in world history over the last four or five centuries, carving up whole continents while oppressing indigenous peoples and obliterating entire civilizations. Yet, it is seldom accorded any serious attention by our academics, media commentators, and political leaders. When not ignored outright, the subject of imperialism has been sanitized, so that empires become “commonwealths,” and colonies become “territories” or “dominions” (or, as in the case of Puerto Rico, “commonwealths” too). Imperialist military interventions become matters of “national defense,” “national security,” and maintaining “stability” in one or another region. In this book I want to look at imperialism for what it really is.

Across the Entire Globe

By "imperialism" I mean the process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people.

The earliest victims of Western European imperialism were other Europeans. Some 800 years ago, Ireland became the first colony of what later became known as the British empire. A part of Ireland still remains under British occupation. Other early Caucasian victims included the Eastern Europeans. The people Charlemagne worked to death in his mines in the early part of the ninth century were Slavs. So frequent and prolonged was the enslavement of Eastern Europeans that "Slav" became synonymous with servitude. Indeed, the word "slave" derives from "Slav." Eastern Europe was an early source of capital accumulation, having become wholly dependent upon Western manufactures by the seventeenth century.

A particularly pernicious example of intra-European imperialism was the Nazi aggression during World War II, which gave the German business cartels and the Nazi state an opportunity to plunder the resources and exploit the labor of occupied Europe, including the slave labor of concentration camps.

The preponderant thrust of the European, North American, and Japanese imperial powers has been directed against Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By the nineteenth century, they saw the Third World as not only a source of raw materials and slaves but a market for manufactured

goods. By the twentieth century, the industrial nations were exporting not only goods but capital, in the form of machinery, technology, investments, and loans. To say that we have entered the stage of capital export and investment is not to imply that the plunder of natural resources has ceased. If anything, the despoliation has accelerated.

Of the various notions about imperialism circulating today in the United States, the dominant view is that it does not exist. Imperialism is not recognized as a legitimate concept, certainly not in regard to the United States. One may speak of "Soviet imperialism" or "nineteenth-century British imperialism" but not of U.S. imperialism. A graduate student in political science at most universities in this country would not be granted the opportunity to research U.S. imperialism, on the grounds that such an undertaking would not be scholarly. While many people throughout the world charge the United States with being an imperialist power, in this country persons who talk of U.S. imperialism are usually judged to be mouthing ideological blather.

The Dynamic of Capital Expansion

Imperialism is older than capitalism. The Persian, Macedonian, Roman, and Mongol empires all existed centuries before the Rothschilds and Rockefellers. Emperors and conquistadors were interested mostly in plunder and tribute, gold and glory. Capitalist imperialism differs from these earlier forms in the way it systematically accumulates capital through the organized exploitation of labor and the penetration of overseas markets. Capitalist imperialism invests in other countries, transforming and dominating their economies, cultures, and political life, integrating their financial and productive structures into an international system of capital accumulation.

A central imperative of capitalism is expansion. Investors will not put their money into business ventures unless they can extract more than they invest. Increased earnings come only with a growth in the enterprise. The capitalist ceaselessly searches for ways of making more money in order to make still more money. One must always invest to realize profits, gathering as much strength as possible in the face of competing forces and unpredictable markets.

Given its expansionist nature, capitalism has little inclination to stay home. Almost 150 years ago, Marx and Engels described a bourgeoisie that "chases over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. . . . It creates a world after its own image." The expansionists destroy whole societies. Self-sufficient peoples are forcibly transformed into disfranchised wage workers. Indigenous communities and folk cultures are replaced by mass-market, mass-media, consumer societies. Cooperative lands are supplanted by agribusiness factory farms, villages by desolate shanty towns, autonomous regions by centralized autocracies.

Consider one of a thousand such instances. A few years ago the Los Angeles Times carried a special report on the rainforests of Borneo in the South Pacific. By their own testimony, the people there lived contented lives. They hunted, fished, and raised food in their jungle orchards and groves. But their entire way of life was ruthlessly wiped out by a few giant companies that destroyed the rainforest in order to harvest the hardwood for quick profits. Their lands were turned into ecological disaster areas and they themselves were transformed into disfranchised shantytown dwellers, forced to work for subsistence wages—when fortunate enough to find employment.

North American and European corporations have acquired control of more than three-fourths of the known mineral resources of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But the pursuit of natural resources is not the only reason for capitalist overseas expansion. There is the additional need to cut production costs and maximize profits by investing in countries with cheaper labor markets. U.S. corporate foreign investment grew 84 percent from 1985 to 1990, the most dramatic increase being in cheap-labor countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Spain, and Singapore.

Because of low wages, low taxes, nonexistent work benefits, weak labor unions, and nonexistent occupational and environmental protections, U.S. corporate profit rates in the Third World are 50 percent greater than in developed countries. Citibank, one of the largest U.S. firms, earns about 75 percent of its profits from overseas operations. While profit margins at home sometimes have had a sluggish growth, earnings abroad have continued to rise dramatically, fostering the development of what has become known as the multinational or transnational corporation. Today some four hundred transnational companies control about 80 percent of the capital assets of the global free market and are extending their grasp into the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Transnationals have developed a global production line. General Motors has factories that produce cars, trucks and a wide range of auto components in Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Spain, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Nigeria, Singapore, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea and a dozen other countries. Such "multiple sourcing" enables GM to ride out strikes in one country by stepping up production in another, playing workers of various nations against each other in order to discourage wage and benefit demands and undermine labor union strategies.

Not Necessary, Just Compelling

Some writers question whether imperialism is a necessary condition for capitalism, pointing out that most Western capital is invested in Western nations, not in the Third World. If corporations lost all their Third World investments, they argue, many of them could still survive on their European and North American markets. In response, one should note that capitalism might be able to survive without imperialism—but it shows no inclination to do so. It manifests no desire to discard its enormously profitable Third World enterprises. Imperialism may not be a necessary condition for investor survival but it seems to be an inherent tendency and a natural outgrowth of advanced capitalism. Imperial relations may not be the only way to pursue profits, but they are the most lucrative way.

Whether imperialism is necessary for capitalism is really not the question. Many things that are not absolutely necessary are still highly desirable, therefore strongly preferred and vigorously pursued. Overseas investors find the Third World's cheap labor, vital natural resources, and various other highly profitable conditions to be compellingly attractive. Superprofits may not be necessary for capitalism's survival but survival is not all that capitalists are interested in. Superprofits are strongly preferred to more modest earnings. That there may be no necessity between capitalism and imperialism does not mean there is no compelling linkage.

The same is true of other social dynamics. For instance, wealth does not necessarily have to lead to luxurious living. A higher portion of an owning class's riches could be used for investment rather personal consumption. The very wealthy could survive on more modest

sums but that is not how most of them prefer to live. Throughout history, wealthy classes generally have shown a preference for getting the best of everything. After all, the whole purpose of getting rich off other people's labor is to live well, avoiding all forms of thankless toil and drudgery, enjoying superior opportunities for lavish life-styles, medical care, education, travel, recreation, security, leisure, and opportunities for power and prestige. While none of these things are really "necessary," they are fervently clung to by those who possess them—as witnessed by the violent measures endorsed by advantaged classes whenever they feel the threat of an equalizing or leveling democratic force.

Myths of Underdevelopment

The impoverished lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are known to us as the "Third World," to distinguish them from the "First World" of industrialized Europe and North America and the now largely defunct "Second World" of communist states. Third World poverty, called "underdevelopment," is treated by most Western observers as an original historic condition. We are asked to believe that it always existed, that poor countries are poor because their lands have always been infertile or their people unproductive.

In fact, the lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America have long produced great treasures of foods, minerals and other natural resources. That is why the Europeans went through all the trouble to steal and plunder them. One does not go to poor places for self-enrichment. The Third World is rich. Only its people are poor—and it is because of the pillage they have endured.

The process of expropriating the natural resources of the Third World began centuries ago and continues to this day. First, the colonizers extracted gold, silver, furs, silks, and spices, then flax, hemp, timber, molasses, sugar, rum, rubber, tobacco, calico, cocoa, coffee, cotton, copper, coal, palm oil, tin, iron, ivory, ebony, and later on, oil, zinc, manganese, mercury, platinum, cobalt, bauxite, aluminum, and uranium. Not to be overlooked is that most hellish of all expropriations: the abduction of millions of human beings into slave labor.

Through the centuries of colonization, many self-serving imperialist theories have been spun. I was taught in school that people in tropical lands are slothful and do not work as hard as we denizens of the temperate zone. In fact, the inhabitants of warm climates have performed remarkably productive feats, building magnificent civilizations well before Europe emerged from the Dark Ages. And today they often work long, hard hours for meager sums. Yet the early stereotype of the "lazy native" is still with us. In every capitalist society, the poor—both domestic and overseas—regularly are blamed for their own condition.

We hear that Third World peoples are culturally retarded in their attitudes, customs, and technical abilities. It is a convenient notion embraced by those who want to depict Western investments as a rescue operation designed to help backward peoples help themselves. This myth of "cultural backwardness" goes back to ancient times, when conquerors used it to justify enslaving indigenous peoples. It was used by European colonizers over the last five centuries for the same purpose.

What cultural supremacy could by claimed by the Europeans of yore? From the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries Europe was "ahead" in a variety of things, such as the number of hangings, murders, and other violent crimes; instances of venereal disease, smallpox, typhoid,

tuberculosis, plagues, and other bodily afflictions; social inequality and poverty (both urban and rural); mistreatment of women and children; and frequency of famines, slavery, prostitution, piracy, religious massacres, and inquisitional torture. Those who claim the West has been the most advanced civilization should keep such "achievements" in mind.

More seriously, we might note that Europe enjoyed a telling advantage in navigation and armaments. Muskets and cannon, Gatling guns and gunboats, and today missiles, helicopter gunships, and fighter bombers have been the deciding factors when West meets East and North meets South. Superior firepower, not superior culture, has brought the Europeans and Euro-North Americans to positions of supremacy that today are still maintained by force, though not by force alone.

It was said that colonized peoples were biologically backward and less evolved than their colonizers. Their "savagery" and "lower" level of cultural evolution were emblematic of their inferior genetic evolution. But were they culturally inferior? In many parts of what is now considered the Third World, people developed impressive skills in architecture, horticulture, crafts, hunting, fishing, midwifery, medicine, and other such things. Their social customs were often far more gracious and humane and less autocratic and repressive than anything found in Europe at that time. Of course we must not romanticize these indigenous societies, some of which had a number of cruel and unusual practices of their own. But generally, their peoples enjoyed healthier, happier lives, with more leisure time, than did most of Europe's inhabitants.

Other theories enjoy wide currency. We hear that Third World poverty is due to overpopulation, too many people having too many children to feed. Actually, over the last several centuries, many Third World lands have been less densely populated than certain parts of Europe. India has fewer people per acre—but more poverty—than Holland, Wales, England, Japan, Italy, and a few other industrial countries. Furthermore, it is the industrialized nations of the First World, not the poor ones of the Third, that devour some 80 percent of the world's resources and pose the greatest threat to the planet's ecology.

This is not to deny that overpopulation is a real problem for the planet's ecosphere. Limiting population growth in all nations would help the global environment but it would not solve the problems of the poor—because overpopulation in itself is not the cause of poverty but one of its effects. The poor tend to have large families because children are a source of family labor and income and a support during old age.

Frances Moore Lappe and Rachel Schurman found that of seventy Third World countries, there were six—China, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Chile, Burma, and Cuba—and the state of Kerala in India that had managed to lower their birth rates by one third. They enjoyed neither dramatic industrial expansion nor high per capita incomes nor extensive family planning programs. The factors they had in common were public education and health care, a reduction of economic inequality, improvements in women's rights, food subsidies, and in some cases land reform. In other words, fertility rates were lowered not by capitalist investments and economic growth as such but by socio-economic betterment, even of a modest scale, accompanied by the emergence of women's rights.

Artificially Converted to Poverty

What is called "underdevelopment" is a set of social relations that has been forcefully imposed on countries. With the advent of the Western colonizers, the peoples of the Third World were actually set back in their development sometimes for centuries. British imperialism in India provides an instructive example. In 1810, India was exporting more textiles to England than England was exporting to India. By 1830, the trade flow was reversed. The British had put up prohibitive tariff barriers to shut out Indian finished goods and were dumping their commodities in India, a practice backed by British gunboats and military force. Within a matter of years, the great textile centers of Dacca and Madras were turned into ghost towns. The Indians were sent back to the land to raise the cotton used in British textile factories. In effect, India was reduced to being a cow milked by British financiers.

By 1850, India's debt had grown to 53 million pounds. From 1850 to 1900, its per capita income dropped by almost two-thirds. The value of the raw materials and commodities the Indians were obliged to send to Britain during most of the nineteenth century amounted yearly to more than the total income of the sixty million Indian agricultural and industrial workers. The massive poverty we associate with India was not that country's original historical condition. British imperialism did two things: first, it ended India's development, then it forcibly underdeveloped that country.

Similar bleeding processes occurred throughout the Third World. The enormous wealth extracted should remind us that there originally were few really poor nations. Countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Chile, Bolivia, Zaire, Mexico, Malaysia, and the Philippines were and sometimes still are rich in resources. Some lands have been so thoroughly plundered as to be desolate in all respects. However, most of the Third World is not "underdeveloped" but overexploited. Western colonization and investments have created a lower rather than a higher living standard.

Referring to what the English colonizers did to the Irish, Frederick Engels wrote in 1856: "How often have the Irish started out to achieve something, and every time they have been crushed politically and industrially. By consistent oppression they have been artificially converted into an utterly impoverished nation." So with most of the Third World. The Mayan Indians in Guatemala had a more nutritious and varied diet and better conditions of health in the early 16th century before the Europeans arrived than they have today. They had more craftspeople, architects, artisans, and horticulturists than today. What is called underdevelopment is not an original historical condition but a product of imperialism's superexploitation. Underdevelopment is itself a development.

Imperialism has created what I have termed "maldevelopment": modern office buildings and luxury hotels in the capital city instead of housing for the poor, cosmetic surgery clinics for the affluent instead of hospitals for workers, cash export crops for agribusiness instead of food for local markets, highways that go from the mines and latifundios to the refineries and ports instead of roads in the back country for those who might hope to see a doctor or a teacher.

Wealth is transferred from Third World peoples to the economic elites of Europe and North America (and more recently Japan) by direct plunder, by the expropriation of natural resources, the imposition of ruinous taxes and land rents, the payment of poverty wages, and the forced importation of finished goods at highly inflated prices. The colonized country is denied the freedom of trade and the opportunity to develop its own natural resources, markets, and industrial capacity. Self-sustenance and self-employment gives way to wage labor. From

1970 to 1980, the number of wage workers in the Third World grew from 72 million to 120 million, and the rate is accelerating.

Hundreds of millions of Third World peoples now live in destitution in remote villages and congested urban slums, suffering hunger, disease, and illiteracy, often because the land they once tilled is now controlled by agribusiness firms who use it for mining or for commercial export crops such as coffee, sugar, and beef, instead of growing beans, rice, and corn for home consumption. A study of twenty of the poorest countries, compiled from official statistics, found that the number of people living in what is called "absolute poverty" or rockbottom destitution, the poorest of the poor, is rising 70,000 a day and should reach 1.5 billion by the year 2000 (San Francisco Examiner, June 8, 1994).

Imperialism forces millions of children around the world to live nightmarish lives, their mental and physical health severely damaged by endless exploitation. A documentary film on the Discovery Channel (April 24, 1994) reported that in countries like Russia, Thailand, and the Philippines, large numbers of minors are sold into prostitution to help their desperate families survive. In countries like Mexico, India, Colombia, and Egypt, children are dragooned into health-shattering, dawn-to-dusk labor on farms and in factories and mines for pennies an hour, with no opportunity for play, schooling, or medical care.

In India, 55 million children are pressed into the work force. Tens of thousands labor in glass factories in temperatures as high as 100 degrees. In one plant, four-year-olds toil from 5 o'clock in the morning until the dead of night, inhaling fumes and contracting emphysema, tuberculosis, and other respiratory diseases. In the Philippines and Malaysia corporations have lobbied to drop age restrictions for labor recruitment. The pursuit of profit becomes a pursuit of evil.

Development Theory

When we say a country is "underdeveloped," we are implying that it is backward and retarded in some way, that its people have shown little capacity to achieve and evolve. The negative connotations of "underdeveloped" has caused the United Nations, the Wall Street Journal, and parties of various political persuasion to refer to Third World countries as "developing" nations, a term somewhat less insulting than "underdeveloped" but equally misleading. I prefer to use "Third World" because "developing" seems to be just a euphemistic way of saying "underdeveloped but belatedly starting to do something about it." It still implies that poverty was an original historic condition and not something imposed by the imperialists. It also falsely suggests that these countries are developing when actually their economic conditions are usually worsening.

The dominant theory of the last half century, enunciated repeatedly by writers like Barbara Ward and W. W. Rostow and afforded wide currency in the United States and other parts of the Western world, maintains that it is up to the rich nations of the North to help uplift the "backward" nations of the South, bringing them technology and teaching them proper work habits. This is an updated version of "the White man's burden," a favorite imperialist fantasy.

According to the development scenario, with the introduction of Western investments, the backward economic sectors of the poor nations will release their workers, who then will find more productive employment in the modern sector at higher wages. As capital accumulates,

business will reinvest its profits, thus creating still more products, jobs, buying power, and markets. Eventually a more prosperous economy evolves.

This "development theory" or "modernization theory," as it is sometimes called, bears little relation to reality. What has emerged in the Third World is an intensely exploitive form of dependent capitalism. Economic conditions have worsened drastically with the growth of transnational corporate investment. The problem is not poor lands or unproductive populations but foreign exploitation and class inequality. Investors go into a country not to uplift it but to enrich themselves.

People in these countries do not need to be taught how to farm. They need the land and the implements to farm. They do not need to be taught how to fish. They need the boats and the nets and access to shore frontage, bays, and oceans. They need industrial plants to cease dumping toxic effusions into the waters. They do not need to be convinced that they should use hygienic standards. They do not need a Peace Corps Volunteer to tell them to boil their water, especially when they cannot afford fuel or have no access to firewood. They need the conditions that will allow them to have clean drinking water and clean clothes and homes. They do not need advice about balanced diets from North Americans. They usually know what foods best serve their nutritional requirements. They need to be given back their land and labor so that they might work for themselves and grow food for their own consumption.

The legacy of imperial domination is not only misery and strife, but an economic structure dominated by a network of international corporations which themselves are beholden to parent companies based in North America, Europe and Japan. If there is any harmonization or integration, it occurs among the global investor classes, not among the indigenous economies of these countries. Third World economies remain fragmented and unintegrated both between each other and within themselves, both in the flow of capital and goods and in technology and organization. In sum, what we have is a world economy that has little to do with the economic needs of the world's people.

Neoimperialism: Skimming the Cream

Sometimes imperial domination is explained as arising from an innate desire for domination and expansion, a "territorial imperative." In fact, territorial imperialism is no longer the prevailing mode. Compared to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the European powers carved up the world among themselves, today there is almost no colonial dominion left. Colonel Blimp is dead and buried, replaced by men in business suits. Rather than being directly colonized by the imperial power, the weaker countries have been granted the trappings of sovereignty—while Western finance capital retains control of the lion's share of their profitable resources. This relationship has gone under various names: "informal empire," "colonialism without colonies," "neocolonialism," and "neoimperialism."

U.S. political and business leaders were among the earliest practitioners of this new kind of empire, most notably in Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century. Having forcibly wrested the island from Spain in the war of 1898, they eventually gave Cuba its formal independence. The Cubans now had their own government, constitution, flag, currency, and security force. But major foreign policy decisions remained in U.S. hands as did the island's wealth, including its sugar, tobacco, and tourist industries, and major imports and exports.

Historically U.S. capitalist interests have been less interested in acquiring more colonies than in acquiring more wealth, preferring to make off with the treasure of other nations without bothering to own and administer the nations themselves. Under neoimperialism, the flag stays home, while the dollar goes everywhere—frequently assisted by the sword.

After World War II, European powers like Britain and France adopted a strategy of neoimperialism. Left financially depleted by years of warfare, and facing intensified popular resistance from within the Third World itself, they reluctantly decided that indirect economic hegemony was less costly and politically more expedient than outright colonial rule. They discovered that the removal of a conspicuously intrusive colonial rule made it more difficult for nationalist elements within the previously colonized countries to mobilize anti-imperialist sentiments.

Though the newly established government might be far from completely independent, it usually enjoyed more legitimacy in the eyes of its populace than a colonial administration controlled by the imperial power. Furthermore, under neoimperialism the native government takes up the costs of administering the country while the imperialist interests are free to concentrate on accumulating capital—which is all they really want to do.

After years of colonialism, the Third World country finds it extremely difficult to extricate itself from the unequal relationship with its former colonizer and impossible to depart from the global capitalist sphere. Those countries that try to make a break are subjected to punishing economic and military treatment by one or another major power, nowadays usually the United States.

The leaders of the new nations may voice revolutionary slogans, yet they find themselves locked into the global capitalist orbit, cooperating perforce with the First World nations for investment, trade, and aid. So we witnessed the curious phenomenon of leaders of newly independent Third World nations denouncing imperialism as the source of their countries' ills, while dissidents in these countries denounced these same leaders as collaborators of imperialism.

In many instances a comprador class emerged or was installed as a first condition for independence. A comprador class is one that cooperates in turning its own country into a client state for foreign interests. A client state is one that is open to investments on terms that are decidedly favorable to the foreign investors. In a client state, corporate investors enjoy direct subsidies and land grants, access to raw materials and cheap labor, light or nonexistent taxes, few effective labor unions, no minimum wage or child labor or occupational safety laws, and no consumer or environmental protections to speak of. The protective laws that do exist go largely unenforced.

In all, the Third World is something of a capitalist paradise, offering life as it was in Europe and the United States during the nineteenth century, with a rate of profit vastly higher than what might be earned today in a country with strong economic regulations. The comprador class is well recompensed for its cooperation. Its leaders enjoy opportunities to line their pockets with the foreign aid sent by the U.S. government. Stability is assured with the establishment of security forces, armed and trained by the United States in the latest technologies of terror and repression. Still, neoimperialism carries risks. The achievement of de jure independence eventually fosters expectations of de facto independence. The forms of

self rule incite a desire for the fruits of self rule. Sometimes a national leader emerges who is a patriot and reformer rather than a comprador collaborator. Therefore, the changeover from colonialism to neocolonialism is not without risks for the imperialists and represents a net gain for popular forces in the world.

Home | Books | Articles | Speaking Engagements | Recorded Talks | Biography

Copyright © 1992 - 2005 Michael Parenti. All rights reserved.